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News Release

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North Kaibab announces recent vegetation management accomplishments

Fredonia, Ariz., Mar. 26, 2015 — For Immediate Release. There is a symbiotic relationship on the Kaibab National Forest among the fire, timber and silviculture resource areas when they come together to combat the threats facing forests in the Southwest - human encroachment, rising temperatures, insects, disease and uncharacteristic stand replacing wildfires.

Vegetation management is the practice of manipulating vegetation such as timber, forage, plants, brush and grass to produce a desired effect, such as changing the quantity or quality of particular vegetation in a specific area. By combining management efforts, silviculture, fire, and timber resource specialists directly benefit from each other's actions and ultimately help improve the health of the forest overall.

"Our goal is to ensure we leave the forest in better health for the future," said Paul Callaway, North Kaibab Ranger District timber specialist. "The forest is out of balance. We need to prevent stand replacing wildfire, epidemic insect threats, and disease. There are no simple solutions. We are overstocked. We have too many trees competing for the same light, moisture and nutrients, and removing some volume will help improve forest health."

Under the guidance of the Land and Resources Management Plan for the Kaibab National Forest, also known as a forest plan, these resource specialists work together to develop and implement on-the-ground actions such as mechanical thinning and prescribed fire to help increase an area's resilience to wildfire, disease, insects and soil erosion, return species diversity and improve its ability to support large-scale fire entry into the ecosystem.

"None of our decisions are made in a vacuum. Our resource specialists are experts in their varying disciplines and have devoted their lives to improving forest health," said North Kaibab District Ranger Randall Walker. "These decisions are not made from behind a desk or from hundreds of miles away. Our recommendations are backed by sound science and are a result of thousands of hours in the forest, ground-truthing every decision we make."

Once forest managers identify a need, develop a proposal, complete the necessary National Environmental Policy Act process, and reach a decision, silviculturists begin the implementation process by writing a prescription - a site-specific plan describing forest management objectives for an area that addresses wildlife and biodiversity concerns identified through an ecological evaluation of the site and that is in line with the forest plan.

A prescription may consist of many treatment activities or combinations of activities to manage vegetation throughout a landscape. When on-the-ground implementation begins, forest and fire managers

work together to ensure the forest's recreational and aesthetic resources, wildlife habitat and other invaluable forest assets are considered and appropriately protected.

If left untreated, fuel loads on the ground continue to increase. Some current proposed treatment areas on the North Kaibab have as much as 10 to 80 tons per acre, depending on vegetation type. Over time, the likelihood of uncharacteristic wildfires increases, which could potentially result in long-lasting damage to soils, vegetation and wildlife, and threats to private property, structures and even human life.

“To put that in perspective, a typical African elephant weighs about five tons. That's a sizeable amount of stress on a land area that's only the size of a football field and already particularly sensitive to warming temperatures and increased dryness,” said Dave Robinson, North Kaibab Ranger District fuels specialist.

During the latter quarter of 2014 and into 2015, implementation continued on the Jacob-Ryan Vegetation Management Project on the North Kaibab in order to thin for uneven-aged timber stand conditions. Uneven-aged stands are defined as stands of trees that have at least three well-represented and well-defined age classes, differing in height, age and diameter. Uneven-aged management is important to simultaneously maintain continuous high forest cover, recurring regeneration of desirable species, and the orderly growth and development of trees through a range of diameter or age classes to provide a sustained yield of forest products. This implementation is being done through the following three components:

Service Component:

Service contracting is one component being used by forest managers to fulfill the Jacob-Ryan silviculture prescription. Over the winter, Crystal Clear Maintenance, based out of Ranchos Del Taos, New Mexico, helped forest managers treat a 775-acre area by thinning small trees that were anywhere from one foot in height to 9 inches diameter breast height, the diameter of the stem of a tree measured at 4.5 feet from the ground on the uphill side.

The piles created from this thinning work will be allowed to cure for about a year and will later be burned by North Zone fire managers as weather permits. “Hand piling of these activity fuels and following up with a prescribed burn to safely remove them is essential to greatly reducing the risk of an uncharacteristic wildfire,” said Garry Domis, North Kaibab Silviculturist.

Commercial Component:

More commonly referred to simply as logging, the timber component is also used by forest managers to thin the forest in order to improve the health and vigor of the trees that are left behind. Once the piles are burned, activity fuels removed, tree canopies opened and an uneven-aged mosaic established, the resulting forest conditions will be better able to withstand threats such as drought and disease.

“Because of improvements in science and fire management, we now have a better understanding of the vulnerabilities that got us to where we are today. We want fire in the forest but at a higher frequency and lower intensity,” said Domis.

To date, forest managers have completed 95 percent of the preparation work on another Jacob-Ryan project area, this 650-acre will be the next Jacob-Ryan timber sale called “South Side.” Additionally, Canyon Country Mill & Resources, Inc., based in Fredonia, Ariz., will resume work as soon as road conditions allow, within two Jacob-Ryan project areas that total 1,200 acres. Work in these areas is about 10 percent complete.

Stewardship Component:

The stewardship component combines service contracting and commercial timber contracting. Forest managers are implementing such a project in another Jacob-Ryan project area called Pearl, which totals 892 acres. Throughout the winter, K & D Forest Products, Inc., based in Panguitch, Utah, has been creating fuel-breaks along the project area.

“Our goal is to prevent stand-replacing fire and reduce disease mortality,” added Callaway. “Our local mills are a very important component in helping us accomplish these long-term vegetation treatments. By removing volume and reducing stand density we improve growth, enhance forest health and help restore conditions that support the fire-adapted ecosystem of the North Kaibab. And, in the spirit of the forest plan, we attain our goal of creating a mosaic of varying age classes of trees to improve the health and sustainability of the forest for future generations.”

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A feller buncher operator, from K & D Forest Products, Inc., thins green pine up to 9 inches at diameter breast height along Forest Service Roads 248 and 248A. Fuel-break preparation is important in order to reduce fire intensity and increase firefighter safety while working along roadways. Credit the U.S. Forest Service, Southwestern Region, Kaibab National Forest. Photo by David Hercher.